Online Course Design Checklist
Mason Online | Office of Digital Learning

Overview

Our Online Course Design Checklist is intentionally designed to be a practical tool to demonstrate minimum expectations for online asynchronous and synchronous course design. The checklist outlines fundamental quality indicators across three domains: Course Design, Learning Outcomes and Assessments, and Course Tools.

Within each domain, essential components are outlined, along with additional ways in which faculty might further enhance their course design. This checklist can be used for:

- Formal course reviews as part of Mason Online's course review process;
- Programmatic quality assurance for ongoing faculty and course development;
- Self-assessment for instructors aiming to refine their courses.

Scoring

The checklist is used to evaluate how well an online course meets established quality indicators and to identify areas for improvement. Each indicator is composed of multiple components, with point values that may vary by indicator based on relative importance and scope. Reviewers assign a rating for each component based on the level of evidence demonstrated in the course. Scores are aggregated across all indicators to determine overall course quality.

Passing Score: A minimum of 80 total points is required to demonstrate an acceptable level of quality in online course design.

Contact Us

If you have any questions about the Online Course Design Checklist or wish to discuss a formal review, please contact the Quality Assurance team at qateam@gmu.edu

1.1 Course Structure & Usability

Quality Indicator	Indicator Description	Why is this Important?	Essential Components
Indicator 1.1 **Course Structure & Usability**	The course demonstrates key dimensions of usability, including unambiguous directions, logical organization, easy access to help materials, and functional links. The course has a distinct structure and organization, including course-level and module-level overviews that make content, activities, assessments, and weekly due dates predictable and easy to navigate.	Creating an online course with a clear structure not only reduces confusion but also demonstrates institutional continuity in course design, allowing students to focus on the content, not the container.	☐ Uses a Canvas course template (such as the George Mason University Online template) to ensure a consistent course and module layout. (__/3) ☐ Includes a Welcome section/module, "Start Here," or similar orientation module that provides a course overview, technology access instructions, and student readiness tools. (__/3) ☐ Uses a consistent module naming convention (title and/or number) that makes it easy for students to follow the course sequence. (__/2) ☐ Provides easy access to help materials, FAQs, and contact information for technical or course-related questions. (__/2) ☐ Demonstrates correct spelling, error-free text, functional links, consistent formatting, and a uniform style for fonts and colors throughout. (__/2) **Total points: ____ / 12**

Additional ways to take this further:
- Create a welcome video with a course tour.
- Use a custom course banner and/or course-relevant visual elements.
- For external resources, set links to open in a new tab to avoid disrupting the student's progress through the course.

1.2 Syllabus & Course Information			
Quality Indicator	**Indicator Description**	**Why is this Important?**	**Essential Components**
Indicator 1.2 **Syllabus & Course Information**	The course includes up-to-date course information and syllabus, including all necessary information for students to be successful, including links and brief descriptions of university services and policies. The syllabus is compliant with Academic Policy 2.5: Course Syllabi, containing all required elements.	The syllabus is a central reference point that helps students navigate expectations, connects assignments to outcomes, and ensures compliance with university and program policy.	☐ Contains all required elements for the University, including a list of common policies or a link to the online version of the addendum. (__/3) ☐ Includes information about Academic Standards in the syllabus and links to the Academic Standards. (__/3) ☐ Includes a statement about allowable and prohibited uses of AI tools in the course, with as much specificity as possible. (__/3) ☐ Lists due dates in the course schedule and/or syllabus that are accurate for the current semester or session. (__/2) ☐ Provides the syllabus as a downloadable, accessible PDF or Word document in Canvas, or in a similar accessible, downloadable format. (__/2) **Total points: ____ / 13**
Additional ways to take this further: ● Use the course summary tool in Canvas so that all assignments are listed in the course summary on the syllabus page. ● Include an initial non-graded or low-stakes activity to ensure that students review the syllabus (*e.g.,* a syllabus quiz or course scavenger discussion).			

1.3 Grading Policies & Criteria

Quality Indicator	Indicator Description	Why is this Important?	Essential Components
Indicator 1.3 **Grading Policies & Criteria**	The course outlines grading policies and criteria, including consequences for late or missing assignments and availability for extra credit. Assignment information includes detailed and transparent expectations. Grading policies follow the GMU university-wide system for grading courses as presented in [Academic Policy 3: Grading](#).	Transparent grading policies build student trust, clarify pathways to success, and ensure that evaluation practices are fair, consistent, and aligned with institutional policy.	☐ Lists grading policies in the syllabus, including late submission policies, extra credit availability, the grading appeal process, and identifies any tools used for assessment (e.g., virtual test proctors, plagiarism detection software) as applicable. (__/3) ☐ Defines grading criteria clearly and presents them within the course. (__/2) ☐ Specifies explicit participation expectations by assignment type (e.g., discussions, group work, individual assignments). (__/2) ☐ Clarifies how each component of the grading criteria (e.g., assignments, discussions, projects) contributes to the final grade. (__/2) ☐ Presents a grading scale that converts students' performance into a standardized format (e.g., letter grades, percentage ranges, numerical ranges). (__/2) **Total points: ____ / 11**

Additional ways to take this further:
- Use detailed rubrics that specify expectations and criteria for each assignment, helping students understand how they will be assessed.
- Share examples or models of high-quality work, along with explanations of why these were successful.
- Build-in iterative opportunities for practice (*e.g.,* multiple attempts, drop lowest score, draft feedback, assignment revisions, etc.)

1.4 Accessibility

Quality Indicator	Indicator Description	Why is this Important?	Essential Components
Indicator 1.4 **Accessibility**	All documents, course materials, media, and instructional tools can be accessed, understood, and used to the greatest extent possible by all students, following Federal section 508 compliance, Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1, and University Policy 1308: Information and Communications Technology Accessibility. George Mason's ATI Office provides support for content accessibility and captioning.	Ensuring accessibility is not only a legal obligation but also an ethical commitment to equity and fairness in learning. Accessible courses improve usability for all students, not only those with documented accommodations.	☐ Ensure documents are accessible as identified by Panorama, the university's accessibility review program. The cumulative accessibility score for the online course must be at least 70%, as defined by Panorama. ☐ When conducting accessibility checks, the following factors are considered: ☐ Remediate documents and files and prioritize in this sequence: PDF, Word/PPT, Rich Content Editor, (HTML). ☐ Ensure videos are captioned. ☐ Provide alternative text for images. ☐ Verify text meets accessibility criteria, including math and science formulas. **Total points: ____ / 6**

Additional ways to take this further:
- Provide audio descriptions of complex images via lecture narration or separate notes.
- Make video or media transcripts available, in addition to closed captioning.
- Design interactive elements (quizzes, simulations, discussions) to be accessible via screen readers and compatible with voice recognition software.

1.5 Content, Materials & Activities

Quality Indicator	Indicator Description	Why is this Important?	Essential Components
Indicator 1.5 **Content, Materials & Activities**	The course provides a range of content, materials, and activities that foster student engagement and support learning. Course content is presented in different formats to help convey ideas clearly and effectively. Students are able to engage through varied approaches such as individual tasks, interactive exercises, and collaborative activities.	Providing course materials in multiple formats ensures that all students can access and understand content, while a variety of activities sustains interest and motivation.	☐ Includes at least one learning activity in each content module (graded or ungraded) that involves content exploration (e.g., knowledge checks, quizzes, discussions, reflections). (__/3) ☐ Provides course readings as embedded files or links, course reserves, and/or digital or physical textbooks, and includes information about how to log into publisher resources as applicable. (__/2) ☐ Presents course content in multiple formats such as text, video, audio, graphics, or interactive objects. (__/2) ☐ Organizes module content into manageable "chunks" to reduce cognitive overload. (__/2) **Total points: ____ / 9**

Additional ways to take this further:
- Use gamification techniques, such as badges, leaderboards, or levels, which reward progress and encourage deeper engagement.
- Include self-reflection activities, such as discussion boards in which students share insights and reflect on their learning experiences.
- Promote motivation and self-regulation through goal setting or milestones to help keep students organized.

2.1 Learning Outcomes & Objectives			
Quality Indicator	**Indicator Description**	**Why is this Important?**	**Essential Components**
Indicator 2.1 **Learning Outcomes & Objectives**	The course includes information about program-level, course-level outcomes, and Mason Core outcomes, as needed. Course-level outcomes and module objectives are clear, measurable, and relevant to the content, level, and discipline of the course.	Clear, measurable outcomes provide students with a roadmap to success, guide faculty in designing aligned assessments and activities, and demonstrate accountability to program and accreditation standards.	☐ Presents program and course outcomes/objectives in the syllabus. (__/3) ☐ Begins each module with module-level learning objectives and/or outcomes. (__/3) ☐ Aligns outcomes with activities designed to promote thinking, doing, and applying knowledge (e.g., Bloom's Taxonomy). (__/3) ☐ Defines learning objectives/outcomes that are detailed and measurable, providing clear expectations for student achievement and allowing for assessment of progress and mastery of skills and knowledge. (__/3) ☐ Uses learning objectives/outcomes that are clear and well written and easily understood by students. (__/3) **Total points: ____ / 15**
Additional ways to take this further: ● Share with students how course learning outcomes and objectives map to program goals and industry expectations. ● Scaffold the course by providing structured support, such as tutorials, examples, and step-by-step activities to help students develop foundational skills and understand core concepts. ● Design the course to include higher-order thinking activities that foster critical thinking, analysis, evaluation, and creation.			

2.2 Assignment Descriptions & Instructions

Quality Indicator	Indicator Description	Why is this Important?	Essential Components
Indicator 2.2 **Assignment Descriptions & Instructions**	The course includes assignment descriptions and instructions that articulate expectations, criteria for grading, due dates, and instructions for how to submit assignments.	Detailed assignment instructions help students focus on demonstrating knowledge and skills, support equity by clarifying expectations, and ensure that assessments align with disciplinary and institutional standards.	☐ Includes well-defined instructions for each assignment that specify the task, expectations, grading criteria, and submission method or file type. (__/3) ☐ Formats assignment instructions for readability using headings, bullet points, and/or step-by-step directions. (__/2) ☐ Provides a timeline and milestones for assignments, including the start date, due date, and any interim checkpoints. (__/2) ☐ States expectations regarding original work, use of sources, citation practices, and permitted collaboration explicitly. (__/2) ☐ Posts relevant support resources that help students complete tasks and assignments successfully (e.g., writing center links, citation guides, samples of model work). (__/2) **Total points: ____ / 11**

Additional ways to take this further:
- Use student-friendly language by avoiding jargon and writing directions in a clear, conversational tone that students can easily follow.
- Model the task with examples by including a short, annotated sample (e.g., a paragraph, outline, or visual) that illustrates what successful work looks like.

2.3 Assessment Types			
Quality Indicator	**Indicator Description**	**Why is this Important?**	**Essential Components**
Indicator 2.3 **Assessment Types**	The course includes assessments designed to evaluate how well students have achieved the specified learning outcomes. The course includes assessments that are varied, sequenced, and paced throughout the course to provide multiple opportunities for feedback. The course may include activities that emulate real world applications in the discipline, such as experiential learning, case studies, and problem-based activities.	Regular, varied and paced assessments give students insights into their learning progress and how they are meeting course outcomes. They also provide instructors with timely feedback to adjust teaching, while aligning student performance with course and program-level outcomes.	☐ Measures each course learning outcome with at least one assessment to demonstrate alignment between objectives and evaluation. (___/3) ☐ Includes more than one type of assessment (e.g., quizzes, exams, projects, essays, presentations, discussions). (___/3) ☐ Sequences and distributes assessments across the course to create a steady pace and balanced workload. (___/2) ☐ Provides multiple low-stakes or formative assessments that allow students to monitor their progress. (___/2) ☐ Designs assessments that require application of course concepts and encourage individual responses, analysis, or problem solving. (___/2) **Total points: ____ / 12**

Additional ways to take this further:
● Focus assessments on mastery, with students demonstrating competency through real-world tasks, such as case studies, simulations, service learning, or problem-solving relevant to the field.
● Design assessments to include repeated feedback opportunities through peer review, self-reflection, and instructor guidance to promote deeper understanding and continuous improvement.
● Make use of simulations, interactive quizzes, or collaborative docs to enhance student engagement and feedback.

3.1 Instructional Tools & Media			
Quality Indicator	**Indicator Description**	**Why is this Important?**	**Essential Components**
Indicator 3.1 **Instructional Tools & Media**	Course tools include Canvas features, live web-conferencing (e.g., Zoom), and other third-party tools approved by the Architectural Standards and Review Board to ensure accessibility, security, and student privacy. See the list of reviewed tools. The course includes media that is easy to navigate, with intuitive controls for play, pause, rewind, and captions. Instructor-created or instructor-selected media and tools support direct instruction and opportunities for regular and substantive interaction, as outlined by University Policy 3014: Distance Education.	Instructional tools, when used strategically, enhance interaction and engagement, support compliance with federal distance education requirements, and create consistent experiences across synchronous and asynchronous contexts.	☐ Uses tools purposefully to support learning outcomes and promote interaction, engagement, and learning. (__/3) ☐ Uses instructional tools that are intuitive, user friendly, and university approved. (__/2) ☐ Provides tool information and instructions for use, such as step-by-step guides, Q&A forums, and troubleshooting resources. (__/2) ☐ Uses media elements such as videos, audio, interactive objects, slides, and/or graphics to enhance student engagement and learning. (__/2) ☐ Ensures media includes high-resolution visuals, clear audio, efficient loading times, and reliable integration within Canvas. (__/2) **Total points: ____ / 11**

Additional ways to take this further:
- Include just-in-time support, such as micro-tutorials, and peer-guided walkthroughs.
- Use shorter videos, ideally under 15 minutes, to promote student engagement and learning in online courses.
- In synchronous courses, consider breakout rooms, polls, and collaborative whiteboards. For asynchronous courses, consider multimedia discussions, peer-review tools, and annotation platforms.

Final Considerations

This checklist is designed to provide a foundation for quality online course design. We encourage faculty to reflect on their teaching practices, seek feedback from students, and explore opportunities for continuous improvement. Online learning is dynamic, and ongoing engagement helps ensure that our courses remain accessible, meaningful, and student-centered.

Faculty may also consider how institutionally approved AI tools can assist with course design tasks. [PatriotAI](#), George Mason's AI platform, includes [SyllaBright](#), a course design assistant that can support the development and refinement of syllabi, learning objectives, assessment planning, and adaptation of materials for multilingual learners. These tools are intended to supplement, not replace, faculty expertise and should always be used in ways consistent with University policy and best practices in online learning.

Learn More

For additional information, examples, and support materials related to online course design, please visit our website: [Designing for Online Learning](#)

There, you'll find:

- Expanded guidance about online course design and facilitation;
- Faculty resources and best practices in online learning;
- Contact information for consultations and individual support.

If you have questions, suggestions for improvement, or would like to schedule a review, contact the Quality Assurance team at qateam@gmu.edu.

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